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DOWN 'N UNDER

(A Collection of Five Stories)

by

Susan C. Williams

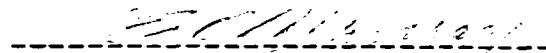
B.A., University of Central Florida, 1975

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for the degree of
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Trapper Peak

I'm thinking how my emerald bikinis are getting caught in all the wrong places as Dan, his wife, Phyllis, and I zoom down the highway in their Datsun pick-up toward Trapper Peak. We're scrunched together in the front seat gobbling sausages and biscuits from McDonald's. We laugh. Sing "99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall"--something I haven't done since high school. I'm on the verge of getting nostalgic when Phyllis says, "What's my hubby wubby want for lunchy wunchy? Please stoppy woppy so I can go potty wotty."

For a half second I think this is cute. Then I want to strangle her. Twenty miles later, just when I think I'm going to scream or better yet slap her, Dan pulls off into a gas station.

Phyllis is further saved from bodily harm when she asks Dan instead of me to get out so she can go to the bathroom. Drown-y-wown-y while you're in there, I think, as I slide down in the seat.

"Are you O.K.?" Dan says.

"No!"

"What's the problem?"

"Phyl. She's driving me fucking nuts with that baby talk."

"It's how she relieves tension," Dan says.

"What!" I say in disbelief. "She's thirty-one!"

"All right, so it's driving me crazy, too. What do you want me to do about it?"

"Why not try asking her to stop?"

Dan tries to repress a laugh and I wonder how he could stand being married for nine years to a woman who talks baby talk. He doesn't strike me as the kind of guy who would indulge in that sort of thing.

I met Dan two years ago at graduate school. We were paired to do a presentation on "Paradise Lost." I analyzed ironies; he analyzed paradoxes. After our presentation, he suggested that we go out and celebrate, have a few beers. Over a draft, he told me about a cross country bike trip he took the summer before and the six months he spent on a sailboat in the Bahamas. I was fascinated. He had done the kind of stuff I'd only read about. Then he told me he liked the royal blue turtleneck I was wearing--that shade of blue looked good on me. His eyes traveled down the turtleneck to my hiking boots and he asked me if I'd like to hike up the Rattlesnake the next day. Sure, I said, feeling giddy. I was anticipating the quiet dinner we'd have after the hike, when he said his wife wouldn't be coming--she had to work.

This was the first I knew of Phyllis, and before the evening ended, I found out more about her than I cared to know. Dan

told me she's of Greek and Italian extraction, a great cook. She takes yoga, knits him sweaters for Christmas. But she really doesn't like to hike, though sometimes she goes along just to please him.

We rarely go anywhere as a threesome--Phyllis works nights and weekends at the hospital. I'm not complaining. I try hard to like her even though I wish she didn't exist. But one of the few times she's been along with Dan and I, she told how recent vasectomy patients brought in used condoms to have their sperm count checked. That was all right, but she described this event while we were eating chicken done in a cream sauce.

But in all fairness, Phyllis is strikingly beautiful. She's petite, wears a size 5 shoe and has long dark hair to the small of her back--all features that I covet.

"Do you want to say anything more about her before she comes back?" Dan asks.

I look at him to see if he's serious.

He's not.

It's eleven miles up the mountain to the trail head. The tires hit the unpaved road and we bounce all over the front seat like dummies in a Driver's Ed film having a wreck. Fortunately, it's difficult for anyone to speak, but sausages and biscuits churn in my stomach--a challenge for me to keep them down. I

fumble through my backpack in search of something to sooth my queasiness, but can't find the Roloids.

At the trail head, Dan angles the truck halfway into the bushes just in case other hikers drive up. Not likely, though. According to Dan, lots of his friends have hiked Trapper and said we probably won't see anyone all day. This is part of the beauty Dan says--solitude.

Me, I like solitude just fine, but this is stepping out of civilization for a day. Since I'm real brave about these things, I called my mother before I left to tell her if I wasn't back by nine o'clock to send out a search party

Dan loads his camera, Phyllis meticulously distributes apples, nuts and juice in three equal portions and I change into my hiking jeans--an ancient pair of Levis with a gaping hole in the seat. We all lace up our boots so they're tight.

Dan squeezes Phyllis and I together in front of the trail head sign and tells us to put our arms around each other and smile. We barely touch each other's shoulders as if we're afraid of catching a communicable disease. And as for smiling, I try, but I have the feeling that it's halfway between smile and grimace.

After a few quick clicks of his camera, Dan sprints ahead. Phyllis quickly establishes herself twenty yards behind Dan, and I bring up the rear. My boots weigh a ton. Unlike most hikers,

I only have one pair of boots--they were on sale and they're the heavy duty type. I have to stop several times to let my heart slow down from beating like a hummingbird's. I swear to myself that I'll never smoke another cigarette.

Dan glances back several times, once hollering at me to put on my sunglasses. Then, he backtracks. He won't ask me how I'm doing, but instead makes jokes about how out-of-shape he thinks I am. Not true. I run two miles every day.

Dan usually races ahead when we hike, so I am surprised when he doggedly tails me all morning.

"Why are you bringing up the rear?" I finally ask.

"When did you rip those jeans? Those weren't air conditioned when we hiked Bass Creek."

"Pervert," I say. "They WERE ripped at Bass. The hole wasn't quite as big, that's all."

"No way, I would have noticed."

"What do you mean you would have noticed?" And then I realize he would have.

Dan is the only man I've ever known who likes to shop with me when I'm buying underwear. I thought this was weird at first, but I've gotten used to it. He says Phyllis won't let him go with her so he feels deprived. He likes to tag along with me and put his two cents worth in: "No, don't buy polka dots. Not the black ones, they're sleazy. French cut are the best for

running--they don't show while you're stretching."

I'm trying to remember which pair I had on at Bass when Dan laughs, pinches my ass and says he'll see me at lunch break. He passes by Phyllis and disappears around a bend.

I study Phyllis. I can't help it. She's what I see in front of me every time I look up. She looks like a miniature American flag in her blue shorts, white T-shirt and red sweatshirt tied around her waist. She holds her skinny arms close to her body, and her hair, in one thick braid, swings back and forth with each step she takes. She never looks back to see how I'm falling farther and farther behind.

The sun is getting high in the sky and I stop to peel clothing. My tank top is drenched under my two T-shirts, and my scalp itches from all the goddamn sweat that's pouring off of me. My sunglasses are perched on the very tip of my nose, the way some people wear bifocals. I look up the trail. No sign of Dan or Phyllis.

For the first time, I have real doubts about the five and a half miles to the summit. The timberline has thinned out and I look around to see occasional scruffy plants on dry, rocky ground. Cairns now mark the trail. This reminds me of desert. Suddenly, I entertain the thought of dying out here, not to be found until I'm a skeleton. Reduced to bones and a backpack. And how Dan will have my hiking boots bronzed, sitting on a

mantel somewhere. Or he'll keep them on his desk where he teaches high school English.

I am still planning my death when I see a flash of red, white and blue. At first, I think I am imagining things, but I take a few steps, peer ahead and then I spot Phyl straddling a fallen log.

"What's taken you so long?" she says, slurping fruit juice.

I'm so winded I can't say anything, and I heave myself onto the log where I sit panting like a dog.

"I thought I had better wait up for you," Phyl says.

"Where's Dan?" I ask, still gasping for air.

"You've been hiking with him enough times to know we won't see him 'til we get to the top."

"But he told me he'd see me at lunch. We won't make the summit by lunch."

"Not unless you speed it up," Phyl says, using her straw to vacuum out what's left of the juice in its paper container. It has the same effect as squeaky chalk on a blackboard.

"It's these damn boots."

"You could have brought your running shoes."

"Kind of late for that now," I snap. "Don't you think we should stick together? This is a long hike. What if someone gets hurt?"

"Dan never stops for anybody. It takes all the fun out of

it for him if he's got to slow down," she says. "Though he was with YOU all morning."

"He was checking out the hole in my jeans."

"He's such a voyeur. He's got this thing about women's underwear," she says.

I look at Phyl and smirk.

"Oh, he doesn't WEAR them or anything like that," she says.

"What kind does he wear?"

"Wouldn't you like to know."

We tighten our boots laces and are just about ready to start off again when we get pelted with snowballs. I don't even need to look up to know it's Dan. When I do look, I see him standing on top of a boulder up the trail, and he's swinging a paper sack in the air.

Phyl brushes snow off the front of her T-shirt. "He's so immature sometimes I can hardly stand it."

I almost choke. He certainly doesn't have the market cornered. What about "potty wotty?"

As soon as I sit down on a rock to eat lunch, I wonder if I'll be able to get up again. Quickly, I unlace my boots and kick them off, wiggle my toes. Dan leans over and pulls my socks off and begins to rub my heels.

"What are you doing?" Phyl says through a mouthful of apple.

"Checking to see if her feet are blistering," Dan says.

"Couldn't you just ask her before you start playing with her feet?" Phyl says.

"Do your feet hurt?" Dan asks, still rubbing my feet.

"Back of the right heel," I say.

"See," Dan turns to Phyl.

While Dan inspects my heel, Phyl takes another bite off her apple and then hurls it about twenty yards. "It's spoiled," she says.

Dan reaches into his pack and pulls out moleskin and a pair of scissors. "A square inch should do it," he says.

"If she needs anymore than that, she should stop hiking," Phyl says just before throwing a handful of raisins into her mouth.

"I can do it myself," I say.

"It's easier if I do it."

"He WANTS to do it," Phyl says. "That way he can do two things at once. Touch you and piss me off."

"Give it to me," I say, reaching for the moleskin. I monitor Phyl's reaction from the corner of my eye, but she's not looking at us. She's picked up Dan's camera and is focusing on something in the opposite direction.

Picking up my foot, Dan smooths the moleskin onto my heel. It takes him long enough that I find myself aroused.

"Thanks," I say after he slides the sock on my foot.

The air is cold and a steady wind has been whipping my hair across my face. I wriggle into a sweatshirt and pull up the hood. When I turn around, Phyl is aiming the camera at me as if it's a lethal weapon. She says to Dan, "Get next to her so I can take a picture of doctor and patient."

He puts his arm around my waist, but then shifts his hand to the middle of my back. He slips his hand down the back of my pants underneath my bikinis and grabs my ass. I would enjoy this if Phyl weren't standing a few feet away.

It seems like an eternity for Phyl to snap the picture, and I wonder if she's trying to read the expressions in our faces, or whether she's thinking smile bitch. As soon as the I hear the camera click, I'm somehow relieved; I half expected our bodies to stagger and crumple to the ground.

We come to two miles of solid boulders, and I remember from the trail guide that we should be nearing the summit. My heavy boots finally pay off and I spring from boulder-to-boulder like a mountain goat. Dan is way ahead, as usual, but Phyl is lagging far behind me and I take perverse satisfaction in this.

I stoop down to look at a white flower growing under a rock when I hear Phyl cry out. I look over my shoulder to see she's caught her foot between two huge rocks.

I climb back down.

"I can't get it loose," she says, her face twisted in pain.

I squat down and feel between the rocks until I touch her foot. "If you lean forward a little, I think I can get it out."

"This is as far as I can go," Phyl strains.

I turn her ankle quickly, the way you rip off a bandaid, and pull it through the rocks.

"Ouch!" she yells as she backs away, and though she has an olive complexion, she's white as a ghost. She slumps on a boulder and holds her ankle.

"Do you want me to get Dan?"

"For what? So he can make a smart remark? I hate hiking with him!"

"Then why do you do it?"

"Because I like to hike. I just don't like making a race out of it."

"It's dangerous up here," I say.

"More dangerous than you know," Phyl glares at me.

I look up to see Dan waving the red bandana he's been wearing around his neck. He's reading something, though I can't tell what. Phyl says, "It's probably Chaucer. He can't go anywhere without taking some piece of goddamn literature with him."

Surely he didn't take Chaucer.

"Do you want to wait here until he comes down?"

"I'm going to go to the top if it kills me," Phyl shoves off the rock.

At the summit, Dan isn't reading anything remotely related to Chaucer--he's reading hikers' journal entries. Most of the entries are unimaginative and egocentric. Things like "Wow, man! This is the neatest thing I've done all week!" and "I never thought I'd make it, and when I did, I just had to smoke some hash to take it in that I'm at ten thousand one hundred feet." Believe me, the only thing you need to do to realize you're that high is to look over the edge, and the world spins.

Dan passes the journal and a pencil, the kind you get when you play miniature golf. His entry reads "3 hrs. 48 min. Could have gone faster if we didn't take lunch break." I can't think of anything to say right away so I pass it to Phyl. When she hands it back to me, she's written, "Bear Grass, beautiful flowers. No wild life to be seen except for Dan--occasionally "

I look out over the deep canyon and reflect upon the morning. Finally, I scrawl, "Fear, entrapment, sore feet." No one asks to see what I've written so I fold up the journal and put it back in the metal box provided by the Forestry Service.

Dan starts taking a bunch of pictures rapid-fire like he's a photographer for NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC. He keeps spinning around so quickly, I'm sure he's going to fall over the edge.

When he reloads his camera with a fresh roll of film, I say,

"Didn't you notice we were having some trouble down there?"

"Down isn't a relevant term. Everything is down from here."

"How about 'trouble?' Is that a relevant term?" Phyl says.

"Didn't you notice that Phyl and I fell off the mountain?"

We're pretty hardy, though, and we climbed back up."

Phyl giggles and I'm surprised. Surprised she'd laugh at anything I'd say.

Dan gives me a snide look and keeps staring at me.

"She got her foot caught between the rocks."

"All right, Phyl?"

"Obviously," she says, not looking at him.

"Well, see. No harm done."

"But there could have been," I say. "We should stay together."

"If it makes you feel better, I'll stick behind you on the way back."

"It would," I say.

"So you can study the hole in her jeans?" Phyl says. "Why don't you ask her to take off her pants so you can really get a thrill?"

"That's a good idea, Phyl," he says. "I'd rather look at her ass any day."

"You mean you haven't already?"

"No, Phyl. I've been saving it for the day when I really

can't stand you."

Climbing down from the summit, we take a different route. We're sure it's going to be shorter. But after we get back on sandy ground, there is no sign of the trail.

"We need to go right," Phyl says.

"I don't think so," I say. "I'm positive we've got to go way over to the left."

Dan says he thinks I'm right and starts walking.

Dan and I hike along at a swift pace, mostly because it's the pace he hikes at, but also I'm anxious to find the trail. I keep thinking I see a cairn and run fifty yards only to find rocks piled at random. Dan is doing the same thing. Every time we stop, we look at each other in disbelief. We've just got to keep going--the sun is low in the sky. It will be dark soon.

I see something red on the ground the size of baseball. It's an apple. Phyl's apple from lunch.

"Dan, over here!" I yell.

I show him the apple and our eyes scan right and left until we spot the trail.

"Oh, thank God for rotten apples," I say.

"Or thank Phyl for throwing a temper tantrum at lunch," Dan says.

"That wasn't entirely her fault."

"You surprise me. You should have enjoyed that."

"I did enjoy the massage. Too much, in fact."

"What about the second one? When Phyl was taking the picture. I liked that one a lot better."

"I couldn't believe you put your hand down my pants right in front of her."

"Wasn't that a kick? It's more fun when it's dangerous," he says.

Dan laughs as his eyes rake over my body.

"Why don't you hike back without your pants like Phyl suggested?"

I can feel my heart beating faster as I imagine myself walking down the trail wearing nothing but green bikinis. Like the women in the Maidenform ads, who stand in public places in lacy bras and panties. I can almost feel Dan slipping his hand down my pants, but down the front this time.

And then I think what am I doing? I can't do this!

Dan comes toward me, grabs me, pulls me close. He slips his hands underneath my sweatshirt, my tank top. Every nerve ending is tingling.

"I thought you said you wanted me to take off my pants?"

"We'll get to that," he breathes heavily into my ear.

Just then I see Phyl wandering around a few hundred yards away.

"Stop!" I say, pulling back.

"Why?" he says.

"Phyl. She's over there. She'll see us!"

"So what?" he says as he grabs me again, but I shake him off.

"Why do we have to do this now? Can't we mess around sometime when we're alone?"

"But I want you now."

"With your wife looking on? Forget it. Just forget it."

"I don't want to forget it."

"Don't touch me!" I say as Dan reaches for my breasts.

"Why? Because I'm married? That hasn't bothered you up until now."

"What's your deal anyway?" I say.

"I like Phyl. Don't get me wrong. But sex with her has been the pits ever since we've been married. The irony of it is that I was attracted to her for her body. Ha!"

"So you're looking to get laid."

"It's not just that. Phyl isn't smart the same way you and I are smart. Oh, she's got common sense, but she's not capable of discussing anything more complex than a grocery list."

"You want me for my body and my mind," I say. "How did I get so lucky?"

"You strike me as the kind of woman who can deal with a physical relationship without getting emotionally involved."

"What gave you that idea?"

"The underwear, of course. You let me select what you wear next to the most intimate part of your body."

"I never asked you to come along, and I don't feel like sleeping with you just to balance out your marriage."

"Why not? You weren't expecting me to get a divorce, were you?"

"No. It's just I thought I meant a little bit more to you than a piece of ass without emotions."

"Hey, over there!" Phyl shouts. "Did you find the trail?"

"Yes!" I shout back.

I turn to Dan. "Is there anything else you want to say about her before she comes back?"

Phyl babbles on about how she was sure the trail was to the right. She just doesn't understand how she could have been wrong. But, oh well. I tell her how I spotted her apple and she laughs, saying how being a litterbug paid off, though she adds that apples are biodegradable.

We start down the trail to see Dan disappearing around a bend.

"There he goes again," Phyl says. "But at least he won't have the pleasure of staring at your ass for the next three and a half miles. Why don't you get a new pair of jeans?"

"I have another pair," I say. "But they're new. I didn't want to ruin them hiking."

"The real reason you wore those jeans was to entice Dan."

"Yes," I say.

"Are you sleeping with him?"

"No."

"But you'd like to."

"I thought I did."

"What changed your mind?"

"He made a pass at me back there and I saw you not very far away. I wanted to stop, but he didn't."

"I know. I saw the whole thing."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"Until now, I thought you were after him and he was just succumbing. But when I saw him grabbing you and you pulled away from him twice, I knew if was going to be angry at anyone, it should be him."

Going down the trail is a lot easier. Phyl is chattering away about a trip she's going to take with her sister to the Bahamas in the fall. Though I'm only half listening, I feel content. My legs stretch out before me and move on their own, as if on automatic pilot. My feet feel like lead in my heavy boots, but they're solid and sure with each step I take.

As the sun goes down, the heat dissipates and it's cold. My

jeans are wet and the sweat is like icicles against my legs. I tell Phyl I want to stop and change into the pair of new Levis I have stashed at the bottom of my pack. She says sure and continues with details of her trip as I shed my ratty jeans. The jeans are at my ankles when Phyl says, "How can you stand those French cut bikinis? Don't those spaghetti straps just drive you nuts? Dan got me a pair exactly like that for my birthday, but I asked him to take them back. What size are those anyway?"

She reaches over and peels down the back.

"Size 5. The same size Dan got me, only I wear a 4. Now I know where they went."

"They're not very comfortable," I say. "They've been riding up my ass all day."

Secrets

My knee still hurts. I can't cross my legs without a pain shooting through my knee. I was swinging high on a swing at the park when I got this sudden urge to jump, the way I did when I was a kid. But I landed all wrong. Explaining to my friends why I walk funny is worse than the actual pain. Their concern rapidly changes into a mocking. "What in the hell did you think you were doing?"

I cross my legs while my brother, David, and I sit on a dock at Lake Osceola waiting to rent a canoe. When I groan he asks what's wrong, and I am stuck telling him the swing story. After I tell him what happened, he laughs. He is the first person who thinks this is funny.

"That's great!" he says. "I wish I could have been there because I just can't believe it! When we were kids, you always timed it perfectly--I was the one who always screwed up!"

He pulls a Kleenex out of the back pocket of his shorts and dabs his eyes.

"Laugh." I say. "Enjoy your revenge."

Just then we're told our canoe is ready by a stocky, balding guy in his late fifties wearing a grimy T-shirt.

"Remember, ya gotta have this back by 5:00," he says with a

cigarette bobbing from his mouth. "And just because it's 2:30 now don't make no difference, ya still gotta pay the half day rate. Understood?"

"Yes," David says.

Baldy throws us two grease-stained life preservers. "Take these with you. It'll give the gators something to chew on."

David and I toss our stuff into the canoe: a six-pak of Coors, a bag of nacho flavored Doritos, beef jerky and my pack of Marlboro Lights. We climb in and are ready to paddle out when I look up and catch sight of Baldy.

"And no messing around out there, you two!"

He winks and stands there grinning at us with ugly stained teeth the color of seaweed, and I realize he thinks we're lovers. This isn't the first time this has happened but I always feel the urge to explain that we're only brother and sister. And even if we weren't, David is one of those guys who's really married.

David met Julie during his junior year at college. He said he saw her in the hall one day on his way to chemistry lab. She was standing against the wall wearing a black leotard and a pink wrap-around skirt. She smiled at him as he walked by, and he said he just knew by her smile that she was special. He never went out with anyone else after that--he doesn't shop around. He says when he finds what he wants, why look further?

And who am I to stand in judgment? I'm always looking further and it gets me into all kinds of trouble. I'm

thirty-one, working on an art degree to escape the business world, and I'm on shaky ground with my live-in boyfriend, Jeffrey. He's a microbiologist who has a real thing about germs. Rather than throw food wrappers into the compactor, he stuffs them into empty milk cartons and puts the cartons in the freezer. Every time I open the freezer, I become so preoccupied with garbage that I forget what I was looking for in the first place. But aside from the milk carton thing and alphabetizing food in the refrigerator, I keep telling myself he's a pretty nice guy. He takes me on vacations to Nassau, does the laundry and plays with my cats. But still, I'm bothered. What I'm really afraid of is that one day I'll get filed under "N" for neurotic and will have to share space in the freezer.

We paddle out to the middle of the lake. The water is still and a thick film clings to the surface. The hot Florida sun beats down prickling the skin on my back and arms. I'm going to get one hell of a sunburn, I think, remembering I left the bottle of sunscreen on the kitchen counter. David, already deeply tanned, has nothing to worry about.

I pop the top on a can of beer and light a cigarette. I'm waiting for David's 'stop smoking' lecture, but instead he reaches for my Marlboro Lights.

"Since when did you start smoking?" I ask.

"Since the beginning of summer."

"But why? You hate smoking!"

He lets out a long sigh. "It was a mistake to load myself down with too many courses. I just couldn't concentrate."

"You'll graduate in the fall, anyway, so why didn't you drop something?"

"I was depressed."

"How can you be too depressed to drop a course?"

"I don't know. I was in a bar with a bunch of guys after corporate law and Ross offered me a cigarette. I took it without even thinking and I've been smoking ever since. I'm really beginning to understand why you smoke."

"And just why do you think I smoke?"

"Nerves. It's your personal life. It's always a mess."

"Thanks a lot," I say.

I watch him light up. He blows smoke out in tightly curled rings, reminding me of blowing bubbles outside the dimestore when we were kids.

"Why didn't Julie come today?" I ask.

"I haven't seen you all summer! And besides, she hates canoeing," David says softly and with a wry smile.

Julie is a graphic designer who lives art. She takes ballet, goes to art galleries and sees only foreign films. She makes all of her own greeting cards--she says anyone who buys Hallmark is mindless. She and David drink a lot of instant coffee, so she saves the Maxwell House jars with red lids and

fills the jars with various herbs and spices from the health food store. I love the ambiance she creates, but she doesn't care about what happens out in the world.

"Did you notice the way Baldy looked at us when we left the dock?" I say.

"Yeah, I noticed," David laughs.

"I wonder why so often we give strangers the impression we're lovers."

"Pretty strange when you think about it," he says.

"Oh, it's probably because we're close in age and we end up at bars, restaurants and movies," I say. "As adults, brothers and sisters usually don't do much together."

"It takes more than that. You and I do get along better than most people. Makes me wonder."

"What?"

"Why people stay together when they're obviously miserable?"

"And you're asking me?"

"Yeah. Why are you still with Jeffrey?"

I reach for a cigarette. For once, I wish I could tell David that things are going well in my personal life. I get so embarrassed when we discuss my relationships, which seem to come and go like traffic through a revolving door.

"What's the problem this time?" he says.

"I don't know exactly."

David laughs. He leans forward and says, "Tell me about

it."

"You don't really want to hear this."

"Oh, but I do."

"Well, we do a lot of things, go a lot of places, and we don't even argue. It's just that the time we spend together isn't really good, isn't really bad."

"You feel numb," his eyes drill into mine.

"Something like that. I know that you have to have the lows with the highs."

"And it's those highs that count," he says.

"I know. I met this guy. But somehow I think why bother? It'll be the same thing all over again."

David studies my face carefully. I turn away. A breeze ripples the scummy water, and I notice we're the only boat in the lake.

"Tell me about this guy," he says.

"He's just some guy."

"What's he like and what happened?"

"Are you planning to write my biography?"

"Maybe," he smiles seductively.

"Oh, all right. I was at an artists' show last month and I met this internationally-acclaimed photographer. He was doing a slide show. Afterwards, he talked about the hectic pace of flying all over the world and the whole time I felt like he was staring right at me."

"He probably was."

"Oh, now I know that, but at the time I thought I was imagining things."

"That's what happens when you stay cooped up with a microbiologist for too long."

"You're funny," I say. "I was on the way out when he came running up and introduced himself. Said he had seen my paintings the day before and was fascinated by my use of color."

"That sounds like a line," David grunts.

"Well, it wasn't. He wanted to know if I would wait for him while he packed up his gear so we could have a drink at the airport before he caught a flight back to Boston. That's where he's from."

David is taking a swig of beer as I tell him this and he chokes. I know what he's thinking. You don't find meaningful relationships with men who are leaving town in two hours. But instead he looks at me with an expression I can't fathom and says to go on.

"There was so much warmth in his eyes."

"Was that before or after the drink?"

"Before we had Brandy Alexanders. His name is Kevin and he's got the most gorgeous blue eyes. Oh geez, this sounds like I'm back in junior high again."

"When you fall in love, it's always like junior high," David laughs.

"You know what really hooked me was his smile. I'm a such a sucker for a nice smile."

"So, what happened?"

"He kissed me and went back to Boston."

"Was that it?" David is squinting at me, disappointed.

"Well, he asked for my phone number. But I just froze. He tore off a piece of the napkin, scribbled his phone number on it, handed it to me and said, 'You call me. I hope it's soon.'"

"Did you call him?"

"I wanted to."

"You can still call him."

"I can't believe you're pushing me to do this."

"Just once, I'd like to hand-pick one for you," David sighs.

Our canoe has drifted and we're floating toward a water ski ramp by Rollins College. The grounds are empty and the palm trees sway gently in the breeze. Gray clouds have thickened overhead.

After rowing back out into the center, we down another beer, munch Doritos, chew beef jerky. Smoke cigarettes. Dangle our feet over the side of the boat.

"Just for something to do we could throw our life preservers to the alligators," I say

"For starters, they're not THAT hungry in this lake, and they don't hang out here in the middle. They're along the shoreline."

"I wonder if many people get attacked."

"Out here? Oh, a few a year."

"What would happen if we fell out of this canoe?"

"Probably nothing. If you scare them and they don't know what you are, you're a goner. What you'd want to do if you fell overboard is to stay vertical. They can't bite you unless you're prone."

"If you fell out, it'd be tough to stay vertical."

"Not really. Tread water. Do you feel like cruising through the canal to Lake Virginia?"

"Sure," I say. "But we don't have too much time."

I think about Jeffrey and wonder what he's been doing all day. Probably playing with petrie dishes in the lab. I don't want to go home to lectures on mold in wastebaskets or how I leave minuscule crumbs on the butcher block counter. Luck of the draw that I get a neatness freak.

I stare up at the clouds trying to decide if it's going to rain. One thing about thunderstorms in Florida, you rarely get much warning.

We're approaching the canal when David says to me, "Do you think I'm good looking?"

"What kind of question is that?" I say. "You're my brother."

"Just pretend I'm not your brother and you're walking down the street. I come up to you and ask you the time. What would

you think?"

"I would think you need a watch," I say.

"C'mon. Be serious."

"I guess if I saw you on the street I would think you're nice looking. Why do you want to know what I think?"

"Just curious."

"You could ask Julie if she thinks you're good looking--which I'm sure she does."

"That's not the same. I want to know what the woman on the street thinks."

"And I'm the woman on the street? Thanks a lot."

"Don't take it that way. I really don't have anyone else to ask."

"Why is this so important to you? I thought you were one of those unusual guys who is happily married and doesn't count the hairs on his chest."

"O.K., skip it," he says.

"No, really, I want to know."

The cement covering the canal tunnel smells damp and moldy. I faintly hear water trickling in a steady drip, drip, drip. David asks me for a cigarette and I ask him if he's got to have one right now. My knee is stiff and achy and this place gives me the creeps, but I end up passing him one anyway. He lights up.

"Do you really want to know why this summer's been so tough?" he asks. He flicks ashes into the water.

"Sure. If you want to tell me."

"I've been seeing a woman named Natalie."

I slide sideways on the canoe seat and lean toward David, but it's dark and I can't see his face clearly. He drags deeply off his cigarette.

"Tell me about it," I whisper.

"It's weird. I met her the first day of Corporate Law. She wasn't even sitting next to me--she was clear across the room."

"What does she look like?"

"Attractive. Brown eyes and hair. But it wasn't that. It was her smile. When class was over, some guy started gabbing and I talked to him long enough to be polite, and then I tore down the corridor after her. I didn't catch up until she was outside, and by that time I was breathless. She turned around, looked at me and laughed."

"I bet you were a sight," I say. And then I realize that we're both still whispering.

"I suggested we go for coffee and we took my car. I don't remember driving or anything we said. All I can remember is that the six o'clock news was on the radio."

"Where did you go?"

"Fitzpatrick's on Park Ave. The whole time I was with her, I was struck by how easy it was to talk to her and how she seemed to understand everything. I asked for her phone number, and when I got home, I was stunned to realize what I had done. I fully

expected that when I got up the next morning, I would have come to my senses. But it was even worse. Julie had gone to dance class, so I called Natalie and we met at Summerfield Park."

"The one by the Golf course?"

"Yes, that's the one. We swung on the swings like a couple of kids--laughing, trying to talk when our swings weren't in tandem. I love that feeling of going higher and higher until you're almost jerked from the swing."

David's cigarette butt hisses as it hits the water and he reaches for another cigarette from the pack now lying between us in the boat.

"I'm crazy about her, but I quit seeing her two weeks ago," he says quietly.

"Why?"

"I don't really know except that ever since Natalie and I got serious, I felt scared. It meant choosing. And I don't know what I want anymore. I still drive down her street every day and I ask myself 'Did you do the right thing?' I still don't know."

"Why were you so attracted to Natalie? You've always seemed so happy with Julie."

"I was. She says she's sick and tired of not being able to afford new clothes or going out to eat. She refuses to do anything that doesn't cost money. I've tried to get her to go to the park or to the zoo, but she won't go."

"I would never have guessed that Julie would react that

way." I say.

"Because she's so artsy? I thought the same thing. But I've realized Julie is one of those people whose happiness depends upon objects."

I think of Jeffrey and his trash. A moldy grape stem is enough to ruin his day--whether we get along or not depends upon garbage reaching the cartons in the freezer. I live on the edge in fear that some unattended refuse will sever whatever bond exists between us.

Rain is tapping lightly overhead, and I wonder what time it is. I can't make out the hands on my watch. David crushes an empty beer can, grabs a mouthful of chips, and says we should turn the canoe around. Slowly, we paddle out of the dark.

Once we're out of the canal, I can barely see the shoreline through the thick mist. Off to the right, I think I spot someone crouching under an overhang of a privately owned dock.

"You'd better hurry it up," a voice calls out. "A storm is moving in."

Droplets graze my face and I turn to David and ask him which way to the rental place. He says he doesn't know, it's too hard to see. We head out toward the middle.

Thunder cracks and lightening flashes across the sky. The wind blows hard, rocking the canoe back and forth. I am scanning what I think is the shoreline when sheets of rain slap across my face. What was mist has turned into heavy fog. Pulling my

paddle out of the water, I turn to David.

"Don't stop!" he shouts. "We're already filling up with water! Head for shore!"

"But I can't see!"

"Neither can I but we've got to get out of the middle. We'll get hit by lightening."

I turn around again and drive my paddle back down through the water. The wind is throwing rain so thick I can't even look up to see where we're going. Every time I lift the paddle to take another stroke, the canoe tips all the way on its side. We're going to capsize, I think. And then I remember the alligators.

I can almost feel huge jaws clamping down over my legs, my arms flailing as I am dragged down, down, down. My head jerking wildly in search of more oxygen, and then crushed as it's beaten against a log.

I power my paddle through the water with every ounce of strength I have. Suddenly, I'm aware that David and I are moving in rhythm, so that when our paddles are in the water together, the canoe holds steady.

"Over here! Over here!"

I look up and see two men standing on a dock twenty feet away. The T-shirt looks vaguely familiar on one of them and then I realize it's Baldy.

Our canoe hits the piling head on. Grabbing the front of

the canoe. Baldy muscled it under control and holds it steady against the dock.

"Jesus Christ, you had me scared!" he says as he offers me his hand. He yanks me onto the dock. "I've never been so glad to see anyone in my life! Called the police and they couldn't find ya. Officer Carter here combed that canal by Lake Virginia. It's when ya weren't there, I said to myself, they're gone."

The policeman hands me a towel and says to Baldy, "Lucky."

I glance back at our canoe and see the Doritos wrapper floating in several inches of water.

A few feet down on the dock, David stares vacantly at the canoe. And even though he's bundled up in a towel, I can see him shaking.

My hair is plastered to my head and I'm shivering. I take a step toward David, but I slip, grab for the piling. I catch my balance and feel my heart pounding.

"Are you all right?" he says.

"I just realized how afraid I am of falling."

He grips my arm, his fingers digging deep into the skin until it hurts. "I know," he says.

"How can you know?"

"Because I'm afraid, too. I'm more afraid right now than when I thought we were going to drown."

"But we survived" I say. "We made it back, didn't we?"

"Across the lake."

I jerk my arm away and step back.

"What are you talking about?" I ask.

"Hasn't it occurred to you that the reason you're afraid of falling is because of me? We're not satisfied in relationships because we're in love with each other."

"What!"

"Don't tell me you didn't feel something while we were in the tunnel?"

"I did! I was afraid of the dark."

"And afraid of me! That I might do something. I could feel your fear."

"I didn't know what was going on. You asked me if I thought you were good looking. I've never thought of you in those terms. You're my brother! I love you. You're the best friend I have. And yes, I'd like to find someone who's as caring as you are. But I'm not sexually attracted to you!"

"You're not being honest," he says. His eyes are glassy, wild.

"But I AM being honest."

"Standing here, I realize that every woman I'm attracted to reminds me of you. Natalie's got your smile. Julie's interests are the same as yours. She even looks like you."

"You've never liked any of the men I've been with and now I know why. You're jealous."

"So what if I am. I can't help it."

"I feel sick," I say.

David steps toward me.

"Don't touch me!"

"I'm not going to hurt you."

"Oh, but you have."

Rain is falling steadily. I take the towel from underneath my arm and wring it out. David's teeth are chattering.

"What am I going to do?" he says, staring out onto the lake.

"Try to put your life back together. Forget Natalie.

What's a smile, anyway?"

"But what if it doesn't work?"

"You've got to try."

"What about you? Are you stay with that scientific wonder?"

"No."

"At least that makes me happy. You can do better than that."

"Hey!" Baldy shouts. "Are you nuts? Get outta the rain. You'll die of pneumonia or something!"

David and I walk up to the steps to the parking lot. The rain has stopped and the sun is peeking through the clouds. Geese waddle along in the grass. They stop occasionally to shake water from their feathers. I look back at the lake. The water is calm.

Down 'n Under

I can't believe Chickie had the nerve to tell me she threw up my pork chops last night. The funny thing is I don't believe her. I'm a light sleeper and can hear a pin drop, so I'm sure I would have heard her heaving over the toilet. But what could I say? Chickie is my mother-in-law. She's come all the way from Australia to see Marc graduate from law school. Every few years she comes back for some major event: a wedding, a funeral, a face lift. She has the canny ability to make everyone miserable, and I think she does it on purpose.

I'm brooding over Chickie and the pork chops while my friend Sylvia drums on her steering wheel to "Burning Down the House" blasting from the tape deck. I lean out the window and squint at the skyscrapers of downtown Houston; my hair whips across my face. It's a muggy afternoon in May and we have just sat through Marc's graduation from South Texas College of Law.

I flop back in the bucket seat. On the dashboard, I rummage through traffic tickets, a map of Houston, vintage gum wrappers, until I feel a pack of Salem menthols.

"Syl, where's your lighter?"

"What?"

I pantomime flicking a lighter. She nods and reaches between two empty beer cans in the trash bucket and throws me a

green Bic lighter. As I light a cigarette, I lean forward and turn down the volume on the tape deck.

"Syl, I can't believe this!"

"Believe what?" she asks, turning to face me.

"That Chickie works it so there isn't any room for me in MY car!"

"You ought to be glad you're riding with me. When's the last time you rode in a Vette? Hand me a cig, will ya?"

"Syl, it's not the car! She waits on Marc like he's the King of England, and she treats me like I barely exist! After surviving law school and Hamburger Helper, I think I deserve to ride with him when he finally becomes an attorney. I've paid my dues."

"Lighten up, Cass! The Hamburger Helper days are over. So Mama rides at the helm, today. It's not like she's local. Let's get a beer at Seven-Eleven."

"We're five minutes away from the apartment!" I say.

"I can't wait that long."

We're not really friends, more like drinking buddies. Syl won't even play tennis without beer. I met her at the pool a year ago when I had just changed jobs, was short on friends, and Marc was busy with school. Syl lives with a guy who installs air conditioners, she doesn't have to work. She lays at the pool by day, and parties by night--usually at bars and usually with me.

I watch Syl as she pushes open the door of the Seven-Eleven.

She's all smiles carrying two cans of Coors like prizes won at a carnival.

We get the last parking space in front of our apartment complex, "Forester's Pond." The place is called this because some architect built a jungle around the units. The birds and bugs are so loud you can't hear the traffic, which is nice. The only trouble with all this foliage is that we have every creepy crawler known to man.

I spot my VW and my stomach churns. Somehow I'm going to have to be nice.

The first time I met Chickie was after Marc and I came back from our honeymoon in Key West. She spent nine days with us parading around in a floor length T-shirt, tourist orange, and her short red hair was tied up in a ponytail high on her head. She took over the kitchen. She fixed curried dishes, chicken cordon bleu, beef wellington, stuffed mushroom caps for appetizers. At first, I thought it was great. I didn't have to cook. But she didn't leave any recipes behind or show me how she made these culinary delights. The only thing Chickie deemed me good for was making runs to the liquor store for the burgundy wine she insisted on drinking at every meal--even with her toast at breakfast.

When I open the front door, I walk right into Marc.

"Where in the hell have you been?"

"To the moon," I say

"I thought I was being a pretty nice guy allowing you to invite Syl. And what do you do?"

"Were you timing me? Was it four minutes and thirty-eight seconds?"

"Just get to the kitchen and start dinner, and no theatrics with mom tonight."

I don't know why Marc cares if Chickie and I exchange a few barbs; he mouths off to her whenever he gets the chance. He claims she deserves it for dumping him when she left for Australia. He treats her less than nice. But, then again, that's the way he treats everybody.

Chickie is in the dining room fanning herself with a TIME magazine and sipping Grand Marnier from one of my best crystal glasses. She won't drink from a glass that isn't crystal--she runs her finger along the rims of my glasses until she finds one that rings.

"Chickie, would you like to change into something cooler?" I ask.

Chickie stares at me like I've just asked her to parade through the room naked.

"Cass, I think it would be best if we stayed dressed appropriately."

Syl, with a beer in hand, walks in.

"Appropriate for what? The North Pole?" she blurts out.

"I don't believe I was talking to you. And besides, this is

my son's graduation," Chickie's eyes narrow.

"We're about to have a barbeque," Syl retorts, throwing her hands up. "This isn't exactly coat and tie."

"A barbeque? Marc told me we were having chicken kiev!"

"That's what I was going to fix, but Marc wanted barbeque chicken."

"I wish someone had the decency to tell me. I would have been more than happy to take us out to Maxim's. I suppose it's too late to get reservations. Barbeque chicken, how awful."

"This is awful all right," Syl mumbles, and she pulls me toward the bedroom.

Once the bedroom door is shut, Syl explodes.

"Who in the hell does she think she is, the social director? What a bitch!"

"Couldn't you have just stayed out of it? Chickie was talking to me."

"Oh, come off it, Cass. If I hadn't butted in when she was going over the dress code, we'd be sweating bullets the rest of the night."

"Marc didn't want a big scene and you just shot your mouth off."

"Cass, don't start in with me about what Marc wants. Are you going to tell me you care? Anybody can see your marriage is history."

"What's it to you?"

"Somebody's got to tell you to bail out. He's treated you like a piece of furniture ever since I've known you. I told you lawyers are bad news."

Syl grabs a pair of my shorts and a sun top.

"I'll change in the can," she says.

I stand there wishing I hadn't invited Syl, Quick Draw McGraw with her mouth. But what can I say? She's right. I try to remember when I first became French Provincial. Was it last year or the year before? When meeting Marc's law school buddies for beer, or attorneys at the Remington for drinks, I felt like a Chatty Cathy doll. Marc pulling my string. After brief introductions, I was out of the conversation. With the wives, I gave recipe recitals. I read cook books for leisure since I knew they wouldn't be interested in twelve variations of Hamburger Helper.

I change into jean shorts and a sleeveless top, and go out to the kitchen. Syl is sitting on the sofa listening to the stereo. Marc is in the bathroom changing. I pull the chicken out of the refrigerator. I would rather have had chicken kiev, too, but Marc insisted on barbeque chicken, potato salad, and corn-on-the-cob. Chickie barrels past me and grabs the tray of chicken.

"Cass, be a love and run along. As long as we're staying here, I might as well cook." She selects spices from the spice rack and opens the refrigerator removing the LBJ Barbeque Sauce.

I stand in the doorway.

"Chickie, I know you're just trying to help, but I want to cook tonight. It gets hot in this kitchen."

Chickie ignores me and pours barbeque sauce into a bowl. I feel my face flush.

"No offense, lovey, but after those pork chops last night, I'd feel better doing the chicken myself."

"Marc and I didn't get sick," I say.

"Marc will eat anything, God knows, and I have a sensitive stomach. Anyway, I do dinner parties in Newman all the time. Let me cook dinner, Cass."

"No, Chickie," I say, and I grab the side of the chicken platter, wedging myself between Chickie and the meat. She lunges for the platter but I block her with my elbow. She backs away

"Well, aren't we cheeky," Chickie says, and then she laughs. "I can't believe we're fighting over chicken like a couple of natives."

I begin to laugh and then I can't stop. Tears rolls down my face.

"How about I start the corn?" Chickie says, "And I'll fix us a drink."

Chickie is outside shucking corn, and I'm sipping a gin and tonic as I wash chicken breasts over the sink. I laugh hysterically as I think, "cheeky Chickie's chicken," "Chickie's cheeky chicken," "chicken by cheeky Chickie."

When I baste the chicken, I remember the afternoon Marc and I went over to a neighbor's to return a meat platter during one of Chickie's visits. When we returned, Chickie was lying on the sofa, moaning. I asked her what was wrong and she whimpered, "I took a tranquilizer. You and Marc were so inconsiderate leaving me alone like this."

I am thinking about the tranquilizer while I arrange food along the bar. I wish I had one of those tranquilizer guns like Marlin Perkins on Wild Kingdom. I would shoot her and watch her sprawl out on all fours in the middle of the living room. Kneeling down, I'd tag her ear with a chicken leg and smile to the camera.

What I can't do is smile during dinner. Marc is telling us his repertoire of law school stories and jokes in painstaking detail. No one understands the legal jargon, and Marc is irritated because we don't laugh when we're supposed to. I decide it's time to serve the champagne.

Syl is at my heels when I enter the kitchen. I am surprised she can even walk after polishing off half a bottle of wine before dinner, not to mention several beers.

"Fun, aren't they?" Syl whispers.

"Syl, you uncork the bottle. I'll get the glasses."

"I hope they're plastic."

Syl deftly pops the cork. She picks up two glasses in her free hand on the way to the dining room. As she passes me, she

whispers, "Piranha jaws managed to keep her mouth shut during dinner."

Look who's talking.

I carefully pour the champagne and as we lift our glasses, I toast Marc, "To our new attorney. May you win many cases." May you not relay the details at the next family gathering.

"To a Mercedes next year," Syl chimes in.

"To my son, my wonderful son," Chickie says with tears in her eyes.

Our glasses touch.

As Syl and I clear the table, Marc comes into the kitchen and puts his arms around both of us.

"How would you girls like a great smoke? Columbian."

Syl is so eager she almost drops the stack of plates she is carrying.

"Where can we go?" I ask.

"How about the bathroom?" Marc says.

"You've got to be kidding!" I say.

"The bathroom has that big window. It won't get so smoky."

Syl nods and abandons the dishes.

"Marc, I don't think this is a good idea," I say.

"She's going to know what we're doing," he sighs. "But I really don't care."

Syl shuts the bathroom door and the three of us look at each other. I feel like I'm in high school again sneaking a smoke in

the john.

Marc sits on the rim of the tub, Syl across from him further along the rim, and I'm on the commode. He slips out his snakeskin cigarette case from his shirt pocket, and pops open the case revealing a few Camels and a neatly rolled joint. He lights the joint, inhales, passes it to Syl.

When it's my turn, I inhale deeply and then cough.

"Quit nigger lippping it!" Syl says.

"You're coughing out money," Marc snaps.

My eyes water and my throat burns all the way down. Smoke fills the room and I feel sick. No one has bothered to crack open the window.

"Do you see everything in dollar signs?" I ask.

"For God's sake, Cass, that stuff costs fifty bucks a lid!"

"I suppose if I choked to death, you'd be thinking about the most cost-effective way to dispose of my body."

"If you choke, don't toke," Syl says, dragging off the joint and leaning back. She falls clutching the shower curtain, and it rips off the rings as she thuds into the tub, laughing.

"Are you all right?" Marc chuckles, extending her his hand.

She cackles as he fishes her out of the tub. She won't let go of what's left of our shower curtain, and I notice Marc fails to mention that she just tore down \$39.95.

Prying her fingers loose, Marc picks up the curtain and drapes it around his shoulders like a cape.

"King for a Day," he says, and he takes the joint from Syl and bites it between his teeth.

"If it were only for a day, I could take it," I say

"I'd take him any time if he thinks he could handle it," Syl says.

I look from Marc to Syl. "You deserve each other. Why don't you go for it?"

"How about it?" Syl says to Marc. "You wouldn't be so bad after a joint or two."

"Oh, I'm flattered, but you'd cost me a fortune in dope," he says as he edges over toward Syl.

"You can afford it. Good things in life don't come cheap," she smirks.

"What makes you think you're good?" he says.

"What makes you think I'm not?"

"Let's have a look," he says as he pulls her sun top up over her breasts. "Great tits!"

"I pass inspection, then," she says, thrusting her breasts at Marc. He grabs a breast in each hand and begins massaging them, running the tips of his fingers over the nipples. Slowly, she pulls down the sun top, Marc's hands still clamped on her breasts.

"I thought you didn't like attorneys," I say.

"I'd never be stupid enough to marry one," she says, sliding his hands out from beneath her top. "But I've had all kinds. I

don't discriminate by occupation."

"How many men HAVE you slept with?" I say.

"I don't know. I was trying to count them the other day. I can't remember after seventy-two."

"Holy shit!" Marc whistles.

"Impressed?" I say to him.

"How many times have you had VD!" he asks.

"Never."

"Bullshit!"

"Don't believe it, then. Do you want to get laid or not?"

"Are you serious? You're living with somebody!"

"So are you. You're married."

"But I don't even like you," he says.

"What's that got to do with it? I don't like you. Cass doesn't like you. And you don't like either of us."

"And you and I certainly don't give a shit about each other," I say to Syl.

"It doesn't seem to get in the way, though," she shrugs.

"Are you sure you don't mind if I sleep with Marc?"

"Why would I care?" I say as I turn to Marc. "I hope it rots and falls off."

Chickie pounds on the door.

"It's the rabid kangaroo!" Syl says, falling back into the tub.

"Shit," Marc says, taking the joint from his mouth, looking

for a place to dispose of it.

"Here, asshole," I say, lifting the lid of the commode. He sucks one last hit before tossing the roach. It hisses as it hits the water.

"What's going on in there?" Chickie's voice is muffled from the other side of the door.

I flush the toilet.

"An orgy," I say, then the door flies open. Chickie's eyes travel from me to a spreadeagled Syl in the tub, to Marc, still wearing the shower curtain.

"Pink is definitely not your color," Chickie says before she walks away.

"Take that thing off," I say.

He sheds his cape and tries to hang it back up.

"Trash it," I say.

Marc looks at the curtain, the rings dangling from the rod, and shrugs. He drops the curtain in a heap on the floor.

When we file into the living room, Chickie is sitting on the sofa, her arms crossed at her chest. Her green eyes meet mine.

"Cass, I can hardly believe you'd sneak off with Marc and HER," Chickie points at Syl, who is now wolfing down chocolates from a ginger jar on the bookcase.

"Hey, these are good! Where did you get them?"

"Indonesia and they weren't for you!" Chickie snaps.

"Pardon me for breathing," Syl says as she continues to pop

chocolates in her mouth like popcorn.

"Syl, lay off," I say.

"As if she'd listen to anyone," Chickie says. "Cass, I just don't understand why. ."

"Me? It was Marc's idea."

"Can't you think for yourself?"

"She thinks for herself enough," Marc butts in. "If she did less thinking and more of what she's supposed to.. "

"Oh, I've heard that before," Chickie snaps at Marc.

"Where? From dear old dad? You couldn't wait until he was cold in his grave before you took off with that slime ball Aussie."

"Now listen, Marc. I know how you feel."

"Oh, no you don't! You weren't the one left behind. You took me to Aunt Ina's and said, 'I'll be back, I'll be back,' but you never came back until I graduated from high school!"

"I thought I was coming back."

"Oh, sure."

"No, really, I was going to come back. It just wasn't that easy. You don't understand!"

"You bet your life I don't understand how you could leave me. I was only twelve years old!"

"I thought we were just going on a trip. I had no idea we were going to live in Australia."

"It was John or me and you chose him."

"I did not. I was stuck. When we docked in Perth, he told me I could either hop a plane back to the States or marry him, Marc. I didn't have any money! I had to stay."

"He could have given you the money," Marc says.

"He wouldn't. His father threatened to disinherit him if he didn't marry me. Said he was sick and tired of John's philandering. And then once we got married, the government pressured me to give up my American citizenship. Then I couldn't come back to you."

"Just tell me something, mom. How could you give up everything for him? Why?"

"I had no choice."

"You were just weak."

"Stop it!" Chickie shouts.

"I won't," Marc yells.

"It's obvious I'm not wanted here," Chickie sobs. "I never should have come."

"Isn't that the truth," Syl says. "This is better than the movies."

Chickie grabs her straw purse and runs out of the apartment.

"I hope she gets hit by an M.T.A. bus!" Marc shouts after her.

"You're not funny!" I snap. "One of us needs to go after her. She can't be walking the streets at night."

He spins around to face me.

"Well, I can tell you one thing, it's not going to be me. I never asked her to come here in the first place."

I let the door slam behind me. I don't know where to look for Chickie. I'll check by the pool first, I think, as I twist my key ring with sweaty palms. I carefully make my way down the spiral staircase. The cicada chorus is deafening, and the smell of honeysuckle is thick and sweet.

Frogs croak from a small pond. When I peer in, a male frog croaks away much to the delight of half a dozen females gathered around a rock watching his throat pop in and out. "Make sure he's not an attorney," I whisper.

I creep along the lounge chairs, but I can feel that no one is here. Then I hear someone blowing their nose--Chickie is standing over by the wall of mailboxes.

"Are you all right?" I holler as I walk toward her. Her eyes are swimming in tears, and she dabs at them with a motley looking Kleenex.

"We were worried."

"Drop the 'we.'"

Chickie eyes me suspiciously and then blows her nose. Her skin glistens, and her dress is glued to her body with sweat. "Oh, I suppose I deserve what I get," she says. "It's just my luck I'd fall for a bloody Australian!"

"You couldn't help that."

"No, I suppose not," she says, followed by a hollow laugh. "But by falling for an Aussie, I got myself really trapped Down Under."

"You don't have to go all the way to Australia to feel trapped," I say, looking up at the balcony to the apartment.

"You're not trapped, Cass."

"He just graduated and has the hots for Syl, but I should give it more time."

"For what? I've made a career out of living with two men just like him."

"But he's your son!"

"But I don't have to live with him."

"I keep thinking things might change."

"Yeah, he'll get worse, and you'll get older. And if you think you're trapped now, just wait until you're fifty-four. Oh, I could leave. All John ever wanted was that money from his father and he collected that five years ago. But what could I do? I can't get a job. I don't have any skills. And even if I did, it wouldn't matter. I'm too old. But you, Cass. You've got a choice."

When I look at Chickie, I can only see her face shadowed from the glowing ember of a cigarette.

"I didn't know you smoked," I say.

"There's a lot of things you don't know about me. Here. Take one. It's a Sobranie."

"Thanks," I say.

I roll the gold filter between my fingers and I realize this is the first thing Chickie's ever given to me. She's sent stuff for Marc and I, but nothing for me alone. I'm foolish enough to hope this is some sort of peace offering. And God knows, I need some peace in my life.

I hear a loud, raucous laugh that sounds like Syl's, and I wonder if she and Marc are about to screw each other's brains out. Maybe they'll both contract syphilis.

"Come on, let's go," Chickie says.

"Where?" I ask.

"Anywhere but up there," she points to the apartment. "You and I have some planning to do."

I tell her about an all night coffee shop in Montrose where it will be quiet. She says the coffee shop sounds fine, and we head for my car. Chickie stops to blow her nose, wads up a Kleenex, and stuffs it in her purse. I tell her I don't have any money on me, and she laughs and says not to worry, she does. Marc calls from the balcony.

"Hey, where are you going?"

"None of your business," Chickie shouts out.

"The hell it isn't!" Marc yells.

Chickie grabs my arm and steers me toward the parking lot.

We don't answer.

And I won't ever look back.

Fed With the Same Food

Every year, Marc and I do battle during Passover. He claims that living with a Gentile makes it impossible for him to fast. I feel guilty so I offer to dine out, he says no. I suggest that he spend the evening with his sister's family, he says no. I even offer to skip dinner altogether, but he says no. We've been married for five years, and each year during Passover we go through the same routine.

This year I offer my fasting suggestions and he scoffs them off as usual. So I fix my dinner. While I'm eating, I feel Marc's eyes glued to the steak on my plate. I shovel down my baked potato, gulp my wine.

I clear away the dishes and wash them in the sink. From the other room, Marc says I'm awfully loud banging pots and pans. He says I have no sympathy. There's only so much of this I can take, so I go to bed early. Just as I'm about to fall off to sleep, I hear noise in the kitchen--something bubbling in a pan, and zip goes the top on a can of beer. Once again, he hasn't been able to last through Passover.

I fix a big breakfast while Marc sits at the kitchen table reviewing depositions, briefs, other legal documents. I'm buttering English muffins when he tells me we're going to have dinner out tonight with one of his clients.

"Oh no!" I say. "Not another evening with some foreigner

heaping praises on you for getting him off a traffic ticket."

"Don't you complain, it's a free meal."

"Right. Just what I like--unidentifiable ethnic food."

"That's it, Cass, don't ever try anything different. Eat Anglo Saxon cuisine until it comes out your ears. And try to be sociable for a change."

"Sociable? How can I be sociable? Half the time they don't speak English. All I can do is sit and smile like an idiot."

"You'll be pleased to know he can speak English--with a heavy accent, of course."

"I still don't want to go. Who is it?" I ask.

"Remember that ship I seized last week?"

"We're eating with a ship?"

"Cass, cut it out!" Marc snaps. "Don't you remember me telling you about that case?"

"Vaguely."

"The most challenging case I've had all year and you don't remember."

"Refresh my memory," I say.

"What memory?"

"Are you going to tell me or not?"

"The Peruvian liner that tried to rip off a welder for eight thousand dollars. I seized the ship and they paid up six hours later."

"Oh, that's right," I say. "You said it was fast and easy because cargo ships stand to lose a lot of money if they're

forced to stay in port."

"It's a lot more complicated than that, but you've got the general idea," Marc snaps his briefcase shut.

"So we're dining with the welder?"

"No, the Peruvians," Marc says. "Of course, it's the welder! Willie. Willie Traub."

"A German," I say. I think of sausages, sauerkraut, red cabbage, and beer--all things I like and can identify.

"He's filthy rich!" Marc says. "He owns four houses: Munich, London, Montreal and Houston."

"I never realized welders made that kind of money," I say.

"They do when they weld big boats back together at eight grand a crack."

"So what time do we have to be there?"

"Six thirty."

"I'll stay dressed from work."

"No way," Marc says. "He lives in Channelview. Wear slacks, nothing fancy."

As I dress for work, I wonder why this wealthy welder would choose to live in Channelview. The location is convenient for his job, the seafood is great, but sailors from every part of the world take over the bars and terrorize everything in sight. Just once, I'd like to see someone terrorize Marc. He's always so sure of himself, barking orders at me like I'm some kind of indentured servant.

I go to the closet, pull out a pair of tan cotton slacks and

a burgundy blouse, set them on the bed, wonder if the outfit will be casual enough. Maybe I should just wear faded Levis and a T-shirt; Marc would die.

On the way to Channelview I savor the silence. Marc is talked out from spending the day in traffic court, and I interviewed ten not-so-smart secretaries vying for a job in drilling and exploration. The hum of the air-conditioner is lulling me off to sleep, but I force myself to stay awake by looking out the window.

Nothing is remotely scenic after we pass the Astrodome. Warehouses hug the feeder roads, and junkyards are frequent with their bent cyclone fences layered with barbed wire. People walk along the road: a man carrying a bag of groceries, two women talking through cigarettes bobbing up and down from their lips, children romping in packs of eight or ten. It's rare to see people walking anywhere in Houston except for downtown.

Once off the freeway, we turn onto an unpaved road, and Marc and I bounce up and down in our BMW even though we're both wearing seatbelts. He swerves the car off into dirt and weeds, says we must have taken a wrong turn and reaches into his back pocket for instructions.

"This can't be right. But it is," he says.

"Do we have much farther to go?"

"Four miles. I hope we pick up some blacktop soon."

But we don't. The road narrows and the trees become denser.

I half expect to round a bend in the road and come upon a castle--like on the Mercedes Benz commercials. I glance over at Marc and see he's having a wrestling match with the steering wheel. We round a curve in the road, but instead of a castle there's a lone yellow trailer set back fifty feet from the road.

"This place looks like something out of 'Deliverance,'" Marc says. Let's leave."

"Too late."

The front door to the trailer opens, and a man walks toward us waving his arms wildly in greeting. His face is square and broad and he wears his salt and pepper hair in a long crew cut. Biceps bulge from under his black T-shirt, and his wrists are as large as softballs.

A German shepherd darts out from behind the trailer and races over to the car. Bounding up with bared teeth, the dog barks at us through the glass.

"I'm not getting out of the car until he calls off that dog," I say.

When Willie gets close, he bellows, "Freetz, down." Fritz backs off and sits at Willie's heels, looking up at Willie as if to say, all right, what's next?

"Marc, get out of za car and come in and have some lobster," Willie smiles, showing crooked stained teeth that look much worse than Fritz's.

"My wife's afraid of the dog," Marc's voice wavers.

"He likes women," Willie laughs.

Reluctantly, I open the door. Marc opens his. We get out. As soon as I'm standing, Fritz races around to my side and leaps up on me, wrapping his paws around my shoulders.

"See, he likes you, ja?" Willie laughs.

Fritz gets down, but then sticks his nose right into my crotch. I just stand there, afraid to push him away--he might remove my arm and God knows what else. Willie continues to laugh, deep and throaty, as he grabs Fritz by the nape of the neck and yanks him away from me.

"You must be Cass. Come inside za house, you meet my wife and child. And I have for you German beer."

We follow Willie to the trailer. The whole while my eyes are glued to Fritz so I can brace myself in case he decides to make another pass at me. I can feel Marc sticking close to me on the other side--he wants no part of Fritz, either. I look ahead at Willie and I wonder what kind of woman lives with this Neanderthal. No doubt she's big and burly and her name is Helga. And the child, well, must be a miniature of Willie or Helga, wearing shorts and suspenders or a puffed sleeve dress with an apron, drinking beer, saying, "Ja?, Ja?"

The inside of the trailer is much larger than it looks from the outside. Dark and heavy hand-carved furniture crowds the living room, and ivory lace runners adorn every surface. An ornate cuckoo clock hangs on the wall, its pine cone-shaped weights dangling from thick, gold chain. I walk up to a bookcase and run my finger along the intricately carved border.

"You like, ja?" Willie says. "I make zhat."

I steal a glance at Willie's oversized hands and I'm amazed they could carve the delicate leaves with faint textured lines for veins.

"Come see mein schatze," Willie says over his shoulder as he disappears down the hall.

I look at Marc and he looks at me and neither of us moves. I know we're thinking the same thing--where's Fritz? While we tentatively peek around the room in search of a wet black nose or a protruding tail, Willie returns bouncing a sleepy child in his arms. The child's cheeks are rosy, eyes a deep blue. As soon as it's aware we're looking, the child burrows its head into Willie's shoulder.

"She's beautiful!" I exclaim, hoping I'm correct on gender.

"I sink she is," Willie says. "I never had za children with za other wives. I'm so happy Carmelita could have zhis baby. It was a surprise, ja?"

What other wives? How many did he have? Two? Three? A new one every year? And my theory on Helga is blown.

"How old is she?" I ask.

"Forty-five," Willie says.

I feel my face blush. I had meant the baby. I point to the baby and Willie laughs.

"Oh, you mean Ulrikke! She is za year old just last week. Carmelita, get my friends a beer!"

Marc and I turn suddenly and see a woman standing behind us.

She is plain without make-up, and in no way does her flowered print dress conceal her heavy figure. Lines crease her face, she looks much older than forty-five. Her brown eyes shine, though, and I extend my hand, say how nice it is to meet her. Carmelita only smiles.

"Carmelita does not speak English. She does not speak German either. She is Portuguese. I am convinced zhat's why we have good marriage," Willie says. "You can't very well argue when you dont speak za same language."

Pointing to Marc and me, he mimes drinking, and Carmelita nods, leaves the room.

I try to imagine Marc and myself communicating by sign language and I want to laugh. I can easily imagine him giving me the finger, but I wonder what else he could say? At least I wouldn't have to sit through painful, laborious accounts of his cases every night--traffic court can be only so interesting.

Carmelita returns with bottles of beer but Willie shakes his head.

"Zhat's warm beer," he explains to us. "You Americans like it cold."

"Marc likes it cold, but I don't mind it warm."

"Since when did you start drinking warm beer?" Marc says.

"I've drunk it most of my life."

Carmelita tugs at Willie's arms and points to the kitchen.

"Ah, it's time to eat," Willie says.

We devour lobster and drink beer, beer, and more beer. I

think how Willie would make a great cocktail waitress; he makes sure no one sits with an empty bottle. I have no idea how much beer we're going through until I see Willie start a second grocery sack for the empties. I panic, knowing I'm getting loaded. Carmelita's smile is now crooked, Marc's voice is loud and animated, and Willie's cheeks are as rosy as Ulrikke's were earlier. Even Fritz looks as though he's grinning.

"It's fun living so many places. I go to za bar in Munich and za men say, 'Willie, where have you been? We haven't seen you in a couple months.' I just say zat I've been busy!"

Willie leans back in his chair and laughs so hard, tears run down his face. We all laugh, no matter what Willie says.

"Why so many houses?" Marc asks, and I can see him planning ahead for a flat in London, a chalet in Switzerland.

"I was trained by Mercedes and I do lots of voork in zhose places."

"You mean the same Mercedes that makes the cars?" Marc says.

"Ja, one in the same. Zhey has a big training school in Berlin and zat's where I learned to veld. I bought za house in Munchen, zat's Munich to you, because I grew up in Schwartzvald, za Black Forest. It's beautiful there. I take you someday."

"You mean it?" Marc says.

"I be going in za summer. I call you."

"That'd be great!"

This must be the beer talking. Marc, newest attorney at Clevinger & Associates, knows better than to think vacation for

a long time. And Germany of all places! He's been dying to go to Israel ever since I've known him.

Willie starts telling us about a miniature train collection he's been amassing over the years. Marc, of course, has to find out how much it costs, and he's significantly stunned when Willie tells him somewhere in the neighborhood of one hundred and fifty thousand. I ask to see the trains, but Willie says they're all set up in his basement in Montreal.

"Vait, I show you somezhing."

Willie pushes back from the table and rummages through the cabinet behind him. When he pulls out a fat photo album, Carmelita lets out a sigh and begins to clear away the dishes. I try to help her, but she grabs my wrist firmly and shakes her head no. I sit down again. Turning the album so Marc and I can see, Willie tells us about the pictures.

"See, zhis is me! Nine years old. I sing in za boy's choir."

The boy in the photo is tan and blond. He is wearing kneesocks, shorts with suspenders, and a white shirt. Smiling broadly, he holds up a black notebook. Sheet music.

"See, zhis is when I was fifteen. Zhat Mercedes zhere is not mine, of course! It belonged to a banker in Munchen."

The boy's hair is now a darker blond or maybe even light brown. It's hard to tell since the photographs are in black and white. He wears overalls smeared with grease, and holds a wrench in such a way that it looks posed. The smile is the

same.

"Now, zhis is when I vas eighteen. About to get married. To Gretchen. A girl in my village. Ah, zhat Gretchen, she vas a beauty."

"What happened to Gretchen?" I blurt out.

"Gretchen? She divorced me. You know. the war. I vas gone a long time."

"I'm sorry," I offer.

"Zhat's just the way it vas."

Willie looks back at the photo album and turns the page.

"Now, zhis is when I vas a soldier. I look handsome, ja?"

There is the young Willie, wearing a Nazi uniform, a swastika on the armband. I can barely see his eyes under the brim jetting out from the helmet, but his smile is the same as when he was nine, fifteen, eighteen.

"You know, history has been too harsh on za Nazis. Being a Nazi Youth, I vas proud. Ve vere not the barbarians people sought ve vere. I remember how whenever I rode za bus, I would always give up my seat to an old woman or man. Ve vere polite, disciplined."

The lobster is crawling out of my stomach. I think about the miniature trains, suddenly relieved they're in Montreal. What would we have seen? Tiny trains chugging around the track belching steam, with plastic Jews riding in flatbed cars? Willie, standing at the controls, drinking beer, wearing a Nazi helmet, pointing to a little metallic bus riding through the

town, with little plastic Nazis standing up, giving up their seats to the plastic elderly?

"I was in the Luftwaffe," Willie says.

I look at Marc and his eyes are glazed from alcohol and hatred, but mostly fear.

"Which aircraft did you fly?" he asks.

"Za best. A Stuka," Willie beams.

"Ah, yes. Well-known for its effectiveness in civilian attacks," Marc says. "Were you a pilot?"

"Nein. I was a gunner."

"Oh, so you had all the fun. "Tell me, did you destroy Poland? France? England? Or all three?"

"Ye did most our missions over Norway."

"Maybe he wiped out some of your relatives, Cass."

"I'm not Norwegian."

"Or is it Dutch? Holland was bombed, too."

"I never told you what . . ." I say.

"Well, whatever it is, I'm sure he bombed it."

"Marc, I'm sorry. Sometimes I forget zhat people I'm talking to weren't on za same side."

"You think because Nazis gave up their seats on a bus, it made you swell guys. You fuckers exterminated people! Not just WASPS in central Europe, but Jews. I'm Jewish, Willie."

Willie chokes on the beer he's slugging down.

"Marc, I had no idea."

"Don't tell me it would make any difference to you," Marc

shouts at Willie.

"Vell, of course, it would. I wouldn't have shown you zhat picture, and I wouldn't have talked about za Nazis."

"But you'd think it was all right to kill Jews anyway, so it really doesn't matter whether you say it or not," Marc says.

"But, Marc. " Willie's voice trails off.

"But nothing!" Marc shouts. "You've talked more than enough, you Jew-killing bastard!"

"But Marc," Willie says. "I didn't kill za Jews! I vas in za airforce. Do you sink I had any choice but to fight in za war? If you were Aryan, you had to fight or Hitler would kill you and your family."

"You were proud to be a Nazi, you just said so," Marc says.

"Marc, Marc, please. I wasn't proud. But vhy didn't you tell me you're Jewish?"

"Did you want me to wear a sign?"

"Actually, I'm surprised you don't wear one," I say.

"Cass!"

"Look at the way you act!"

"Get your purse, Cass. We're leaving. Or maybe I should leave you here, you Nazi sympathizer!"

"How dare you! When we came here tonight, you had to have known Willie could have been a Nazi."

"So what if I did?"

"Why, Marc?"

"You God damn Aryans deserve to sweat a little."

"Oh, that's it, take it out on all of us. Can't you see people as people?"

For the first time, I notice Carmelita is standing at the table. She is crying in short, muffled sobs. Walking over to her, Willie puts his arm around her shoulders and kisses her tenderly on the forehead. He tells us Carmelita has made a chocolate rum cake for dessert, though he doubts we want it now.

"I wouldn't mind a piece," I say

"I'll see you in the car," Marc says.

I gingerly walk out to the car in pitch blackness. I turn around to see Willie and Carmelita's silhouettes at the trailer door. "Guten nacht," Willie says, and it hangs in the humid night air even after the door is shut.

Marc pops the gear shift into reverse and we wobble back onto the dirt road. The car careens over rocks, weeds, anything in its path. I grab the door handle to steady myself.

I can see the freeway when Marc swerves off the road on the shoulder and strips the gears as he jams the shift into park.

"Guten nacht my ass!" he explodes, flipping off the air conditioner. "Jesus Christ! I could have killed him! And you! You sold out, Cass. But what's it to you, anyway? You're not a Jew."

"What's that got to do with it? You think because I'm not Jewish, I love Nazis? What kind of logic is that? I don't ask you to drag me all over Houston to these god-awful dinners!"

"Oh, and I suppose that's all my fault," Marc throws up his hands. "I'll tell you one thing. Next year on Passover, I'm going to my sister's or get the hell out of the house, but I'm going to make it through Passover," Marc's voice breaks and he lays his head on the steering wheel. He starts to shake.

"Marc?"

"Yeah."

"You o.k.?"

"No. I can't take it anymore."

"Take what?"

"I'm such an asshole."

He reaches across the seat with his smooth manicured hand to stroke my face. I pull away.

"Guess I'd better get us home," he says.

We get back on the freeway. Near the Astrodome, traffic from the rodeo pours onto 610 South and we have to slow down. It's spitting rain.

"What about dinner tomorrow night?" I ask.

"Fix anything you want," he says.

"I'd like sausages and sauerkraut."

I smile.

I will never tell him that I'm not Dutch.

I'm German.

Thicker Than Water

"Oh, shit!" I yell as I run down the hall in my robe with a towel wrapped around my head.

"What's the matter?" Aunt June asks lazily from the kitchen.

"I just called the Hilton to make sure David made the reservation for brunch and he hasn't."

"Are you sure?" she drones on. "He said to me just yesterday he was going to do it."

"He says a lot of things," I say as I disappear into the bathroom.

David is always making promises he doesn't keep. At least he's only my brother and I'm not married to him, like Julie. I tell myself. He would drive me nuts. This wouldn't be such a disaster except that it's Father's Day. Every place in Orlando will be booked. Oh, the Hilton has a reservation at eleven o'clock for "Arthur," but there's four in our party, not three. And I don't for a minute think David screwed up on the number--the Arthurs for three are a different party altogether. Why don't I wise up and do these things myself?

I look at the clock and it's ten thirty, which means Dad has already left. I dial David's number and there's no answer. Either he's still in bed or he and Julie are in the shower.

That's another thing--he's always late. I'd better haul ass down to the Hilton and see if I can't beat out the Arthur's for three. I don't want to have to explain this to Dad.

As I dress and apply my make-up at lightning speed, I think how ever since Dad's been living with Jeannie, he's never offered for me to stay with him when I visit. I can't figure out why. I've met Jeannie and she's friendly enough. And they have a sprawling house in Winter Springs--it's not like they don't have the room. But every time I call Dad to say I'm coming, he says to let him know when I get to David's or Aunt June's. And since I can't stand David's piles of dirty clothes or the perpetual mountain of dirty dishes in the kitchen sink, I stay with Aunt June.

At the Hilton, Dad is standing in the lobby smoking a cigarette.

"Been here long?" I say, trying to sound casual.

"About five minutes, baby doll. Where's your brother?"

I hate it when he calls me that. It makes me feel like I'm five years old.

"Running behind as usual," I say.

"Then why don't we go ahead and sit down. He'll find us."

I charge up to the maitre d' and tell him that the Arthur party of three is here, though we'll be expecting another person.

Momentarily, his eyebrows furrow and he says he'll need to check his reservation book. I follow him over to the podium. He scrolls down the list and says that the Arthur party has already arrived and is seated. I say I just don't understand. He gives me a reassuring nod before he excuses himself to speak with the manager.

I look around at the thick carpet and the marble fountain and think a place like this will surely squeeze us in.

"Is there a problem, baby doll?"

"Funny," I say. "There are two parties of Arthurs for eleven o'clock. Can you imagine?"

"No, I can't."

"Just some kind of mix up, Dad. It'll be all right."

The maitre d' returns with a smile and says he'll show us to our table.

"Well, that's more like it," Dad says.

The dining room is plush and in shades of pink and red. Odd decor for Father's Day. We're taken to a booth alongside the window, and as soon as the maitre d' finishes telling us to enjoy our meal, he's replaced by a white-jacketed man holding a huge bottle of champagne. He fills our glasses.

"Has that sorry brother of yours got a job yet?"

"I don't think so," I say

"He's been out of law school for almost a year now. You'd

think he'd get out there and rob people blind the way the rest of his profession does."

"He's waiting to sit the Bar," I say.

"We'd be better off without attorneys altogether. And just what's his excuse for being late today?"

"Beats me. You know how he is."

I wish we'd go over to the smorgasbord and get something to eat. The smell of the roast beef is nearly killing me. So near and yet so far. And if I down anymore of this champagne, I'm going to have to crawl to the serving table.

I'm glancing nonchalantly around the room when I catch sight of David and Julie.

"Here he comes," I warn Dad.

"Nice place," David says as his eyes scan the room. "You've got great taste in restaurants."

"Always have," Dad says, trying to hide how pleased he is with himself.

Julie leans over and pecks Dad on the cheek and says, "Happy Dad's Day, Mr. A." She slides into the booth and smacks her box of cigarettes on the table. Her hair is still wet and her eyeliner is a quarter inch thicker than usual. "Ooohh, bubbly!" she exclaims, eyeing my glass.

David scoots in beside Julie and his hair is wet too, and his tie rests over his shirt pocket. He fishes a greeting

card-sized envelope out of his suit coat and hands it to Dad. The corners are bent and there are black marks all over it as if it's been stepped on a few dozen times. What lies is he giving him this year, I wonder.

"Thanks, son. More than I got from your sister."

"Hey, wait a minute!" I say. "I've got a card for you. It's at Aunt June's. I forgot it on the way out this morning when."

"Let's get you some champagne, son."

Amazing what a card can do. And to top it off, it's a stupid card: a Dalmation with its tongue hanging out. "To the Top Dog," it says in bright red letters across the top. At least my card has ships sailing at sunset with a nice, but not too drippy message. But for right now, I'm dry-docked.

The food is great, we're eating in great quantities, but we're also drinking champagne by the gallon. That's part of the brunch--all the champagne you can drink.

Dad excuses himself to go to the men's room. He always says you never own a beer, you just borrow it--the same goes for champagne. Here comes my golden opportunity to ream David out for not making the reservation, but I'm not quick enough. As soon as Dad leaves the table, Julie begins to cry.

"What's the matter?" I say.

"Nothing," she says as her eyeliner streams down her face and she looks like a clown.

"Hon, what is it?" David says as he puts his arm around her.

"Just leave me alone, you creep."

"Did you guys have a fight this morning?"

"No!" David says.

"Well, then what's the problem?"

"I guess I'll tell YOU," Julie leans across the table toward me.

"Thanks a lot," David says, withdrawing his arm from her shoulder.

Julie bursts into a torrent of tears and lays her head on the table. I pat her head but my fingers get caught in her styling mousse. Sorry, I say as I untangle my fingers.

"That's o.k." she sobs. "I had an abortion."

"What! When?"

"Oh, geez," David groans.

"Several years ago when David and I were still dating."

"Julie, Julie, Julie," he says.

"I don't care! It still hurts. It's Father's Day. You could have been a father."

"Gee, I'm sorry," I say.

I see Dad on his way back from the men's room. His napkin is still tucked in his pants and it flaps as he walks. I start to laugh.

"What in the hell's so funny?" David snaps.

"Dad. He's walking through the dining room with a napkin stuck down his pants."

Julie stops crying suddenly to look at Dad. "Oh," she says. "I'd better pull myself together. I don't want to ruin Mr. A's day "

What about ours or don't we count?

"Maybe you should go to the restroom," David says.

"Good idea," I second the motion.

He stands up and helps her out of the booth.

When Dad sits down again, he suggests we go over to the dessert table. I breathe a sigh a relief. It's fairly easy to lose yourself in raspberry cheesecake, hazelnut mousse, or baked Alaska. And since I can't quite decide which one to have, I take one of each. Julie must be suffering from the same malady, as when she returns from the restroom and dessert table, I see she's done the same thing, except that she has an orange ambrosia instead of the cheesecake.

As I sit here inhaling all this richness, it suddenly dawns on me that David and I haven't discussed who is going to pay for all this. I inventory the buffet tables, the champagne, the polite maitre d, and I guess this is going to cost about fifteen dollars per person. This worries me. I'm broke. David doesn't have a job and Julie works as a secretary for Church Street Station. The only one with any real cash flow is Dad. And it's

Father's Day! I encourage Dad to drink more champagne in hopes that he'll need to go to the men's room again. David and I need to discuss high finance--that or we're going to be washing dishes for a very long time.

Dad's bladder shows amazing capacity. The champagne keeps coming and Dad keeps talking. He's a manufacturer's rep for large factory parts, and he talks sprockets and gear boxes until I wonder if he's going to ask us to place an order.

Funny, when we're all together like this, he rarely asks us what we're doing with our lives, as if it's inconsequential. And except for business, he never really tells us about his, like he really doesn't want us to know. Suddenly, I feel outraged.

"How's Jeannie?" I ask, deciding to be adventurous.

"Fine."

"Why isn't she here today?"

"She's with her own father."

"Are we going to get to see her later?"

"Well, I hadn't really planned on it."

"Why? Are you embarrassed about us or something?"

"What kind of a question is that?"

"Well, we rarely get to see her," I say.

"I thought you came here to see me," Dad grunts.

"Well, I did."

"So, then what's the big deal?"

Dad's bladder finally gives out or he's decided that he's had enough of twenty questions. In any case, he excuses himself again and goes to the restroom. As soon as he's out of an earshot, David starts in.

"What are you trying to pull?" he says.

"Well, don't you ever want to know what Dad's life is like?" I say.

"You're crazy! He doesn't want to talk about that kind of stuff."

"Then why are we here?"

Julie's eyes dart back and forth between David and I as if she's watching a tennis match.

"We're here because this is what we're supposed to do," David says matter-of-factly.

"We're supposed to sit here, enduring a meal we can't afford because this is what we're SUPPOSED to do," I say.

"Well, yeah. Something like that."

Dollar signs flash across the big screen between my ears.

"And speaking of money, just how are we going to pay for this?"

David looks off into space as if he's just thought of it for the first time. "Well, I don't know."

"Don't you ever think ahead? You were a Boy Scout once. Do you have any idea what this is going to cost?"

"A bundle, if you ask me," Julie pipes in.

"I didn't, but you got it," I say. "You know I can't afford this!"

"And you know I can't," I David says defensively "I guess the old man is going to have to spring for this one."

"We can't do that!"

"Why not?"

"I know you're not a heavy weight in ethics, but you can't ask Dad to pay for brunch on Father's Day."

"What about credit cards?" he says.

"Not ours," Julie says, rolling her eyes and looking at David. "They were up to the limit months ago."

"Well, I do have American Express," I offer, hesitantly, wishing I had left home without it. "But it will only keep this at bay until the first of next month."

"Good enough," Julie chirps. "I'll postdate you a check for our portion."

"Settled," David raps his fist on the table.

This feels like an auction and I've just lost.

Dad sits back down and plunges into his after brunch speech about how wonderful it's been to be around his kids on Father's Day. I could just puke. Is this the same man who left for the can in a huff? I could have eaten with the people at the next table and had a more meaningful experience. But of course--

they're not related.

The waiter presents the bill to David, who swiftly passes it to Julie, who passes it to me. I want so say "gin," but when I see the total of \$102.50, I feel like we're playing hearts instead: the check is like having the queen of spades dumped on you the last trick of the game. Grudgingly, I pull out my plastic, tack on a generous tip and sign my life away.

Full and uncomfortable, we make our way back out to the lobby where there's a gift shop displaying all kinds of cheap Father's Day gifts. Dad wanders in while Julie, David and I stand outside.

"Hey, look! There's a T-shirt that says 'World's Best Dad,'" Julie exclaims.

"I'm surprised they don't have '87 tacked on so you'd feel obligated to buy one every year," David says.

"That's not such a bad idea," I say. "That might give Fathers more incentive. Imagine them saying, 'Well, I was the World's Best Dad in '58 and '59, but I didn't regain the title until after the kids graduated from college.'"

"That's assuming they earn the title in the first place," David retorts.

Dad is staring at the T-shirt and I think--you wish. But so much for acting upon beliefs. David walks into the shop and buys Dad the shirt.

Dad waves the shirt around like it's a flag. "This is great!" he says. "Just wait until Jeannie sees this!"

Like an idiot, I have brought along my camera. Why I would want proof of this event, I don't know. Rather than hold the camera I slip the thick strap around my neck, but with every step the Pentax thumps against my stomach, rearranging too many entrées and desserts.

David, king of the bright ideas, spots my camera and says we should take a picture. Sure, I say and line them up against a wall outside the Hilton.

"This feels like we're in front of a firing squad," David says.

"That's creepy," Julie says.

Oh, I wouldn't really want to kill them--not just yet. I'd much rather volunteer them for the next Explorer expedition where they could drive each other nuts for a quarter of a million miles.

I'm focused and ready to say 'smile' when David says, "We can't take it here. It's not scenic enough. Let's go down to Lake Eola."

"It's a block away!" I say.

"It's only a block, baby doll. Come on."

I'm out-voted. That's it, just prolong the agony, I think, as we troop down the block single file like a bunch of baby

ducks.

The hot Florida sun is beating down and I can't find shade anywhere. Every angle I try I know there's going to be glare. I move Dad, David and Julie around like pawns on a chess board. Finally, I decide on placing them in front of a flower garden, but I'm too close. I keep inching back. And back. And back. The next thing I know I'm ankle deep in water--I have backed myself into the lake.

"Going for an underwater shot?" David laughs.

"Let's just forget it," Dad says, shaking his head.

"What do you mean forget it?" Julie pouts. "She's moved us around on every square inch of this park. The least she can do is take the picture."

"No," Dad says. "I've had enough."

"What do you mean YOU'VE had enough!" I shout as I walk toward them, water pouring out of my seventy-two dollar heels I saved up six months for.

"Take the seaweed off your ankle," David says.

"If I do, I'm going to strangle you with it."

"That might prove interesting," he says.

"Keep talking," I snap. "You're the one who wanted a picture by the lake."

"Me? Me?" he yells. "What's your problem? What have I done to you?"

"What have you done? What haven't you done?"

"Just look what you're doing. This is Father's Day! Why don't you just make a big scene and ruin everything."

"Ha!" I say, sure David is going to suffer death by seaweed strangulation.

"Hey!" Julie says. "This isn't cool."

"Yeah, baby doll. Simmer down," Dad pipes in. "Just take the picture, o.k.?"

Baby doll? I feel more like a tarantula. I snap the picture.

As if on cue, Dad looks at his watch, says he told Jeannie he'd meet her.

"Send me a reprint, baby doll," he says as he deposits a perfunctory kiss on my cheek. He disappears down the street but not before he turns around and gives us a wave like he's running for public office.

"Sorry, Sis. I know it's been tense," David says, and he drapes his arm around me. "Don't sweat. It's over for another year. We survived it, huh?"

If that's the case, I should become I survival specialist.

"Oh, shit!" I say as I slam the front door.

"What's the matter?" Aunt June says.

"David, as usual. I'm stuck with the bill," I say.

"Funny," she says. "He said to me just yesterday that he was going to pay for it."

"What!"

"That's what he said," her voice trails off.

What am I going to do? Call him up? I can't take it. I just can't bear the thought of having to deal with him any more today. Scarlett O'Hara wasn't such a ditz after all when she said, 'I'll just think of that tomorrow.' Sometimes, that's the only way to cope.